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Editorial

Between the “Structural” and the “Everyday”: Bridging Macro and Micro Perspectives in Comparative Urban Research

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Abstract

The discussion around placing cities within a larger network of cities and the criteria by which they are assessed has recently gained new momentum. Consideration of Southern, disadvantaged, or “peripheral” geographies previously neglected in comparative approaches are now being considered and have opened up new perspectives on the wider urban context. This thematic issue, thereby, explores the practical challenges of how comparative urbanism across a broadening range of dissimilar places across the globe is handled. The collection of empirical studies presented will lay out the challenges and insights gained into applying comparative methodologies to the real-world context, thereby contributing to the advancement of empirical tools for complex and multi-scalar research environments.

Keywords

city networks; comparative urbanism; empirical methods; research design

Issue

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For informed decision-making, cities gain from a comparative view that enables an understanding of their position within larger networks of cities (Nijman, 2007; Robinson, 2011, 2023; Tilly, 1984). This thematic issue takes inspiration from current debates around, and approaches to, comparison in this crucial moment, where postcolonial thought considerably challenges more traditional ways of seeing and analysing sociospatial change. As scholars have argued in the past decades, much of urban and planning studies have restricted themselves to cases from the North Atlantic regions to build theory and to identify expected as well desired futures of cities, while Southern cities have mostly been disregarded as more or less deficient places that reflect backwardness rather than innovation and creativity (Robinson, 2011). Southern urban scholars increasingly criticize this stance, particularly in terms of claims of universal validity of theories and concepts derived

from an empirical base that is actually often limited to the global Northwest (e.g., Watson, 2009). The related call for a stronger research focus on hitherto largely neglected places has led to an increased emphasis of comparison of dissimilar places across the globe (e.g., Tuvikene et al., 2017).

It is not least this renewed attention to comparison across contrasting cases that requires strategies that are able to bridge scales and integrate insights from different “structural” institutional framings and individual “everyday” urban experiences. One approach is to study cities from a macro-perspective, to examine structural aspects, be they economic forces, technological innovations, or social changes as explanatory factors for the evolution of individual cities and regions, termed “encompassing” research by Tilly (1984) or “generative” research by Robinson (2023). This approach lends itself to comparative research as it identifies broader trends

that might have similar impacts in individual places. Another approach to understanding cities is to study them from the bottom-up, focusing on everyday practices of actors shaping urban life and form. Tilly (1984) has referred to this as “individualising” or “variation finding,” while Robinson (2023) recently introduced the term “genetic comparison.” Related methods lend themselves to understand the particular, place-specific characteristics that make every city unique. While these have occasionally been framed as opposed to each other or even mutually exclusive (Berking & Löw, 2008), we argue that all forms of comparative urbanism implicitly have to consider institutional and/or theoretical frameworks as well as particularities of the case at hand (see also Healey, 2012). As Nijman (2007) has explained, the process of globalized urbanization comes with aspects of convergence and aspects of divergence in urban development simultaneously. While research may focus more on one or the other, cities remain places where broader structural trends and place-specific, everyday activities constitute one another.

This thematic issue presents studies that feature comparative research designs and empirical work straddling these different scales. Contributions to the thematic issue mobilise specific concepts and approaches that illuminate the manifold interrelations of the everyday and structural aspects and allow for a comparative study of these interrelations. Thus, this thematic issue contributes to recent calls for studies that enable comparison across different cases within various contexts; as well as meaningful generalization, while acknowledging the situatedness of place-specific constellations and experiences. Taken together, the contributions to this thematic issue respond to the challenge of linking everyday experiences and structural processes in comparative research.

In his methodological reflections on ways to comparatively study *housing pathways of “missing” people of public housing and resettlement programmes*, Raffael Beier studies three cases: Gauteng City Region, South Africa; Casablanca, Salé, Morocco; and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Beier elaborates on the innovative methodologies he applied in order to find these “hidden” people, who are often not only spatially dispersed but also subject to stigmatization and therefore less willing to participate in research. He mobilises the concept of housing pathways to link individual agency with broader social structures in order to understand how these structures, influence and, indeed, constrain individual agency of often marginalized populations in their housing choices. He shows how changes in housing affordability results in many people either moving out of public housing schemes or never arriving there at all. Specifically, his cross-country comparison allows him to analyse how structural aspects matter for individual decision-making beyond contextual specifics.

Sander van Lanen (2023, p. 289) combines recent insights from political economy and urban studies to con-

struct a “spatial political economy of everyday life” in order to illustrate the ways in which structural changes and everyday life co-constitute one another. Using an embedded comparative approach, he presents an intra-national comparison of two settlements in Ireland in order to shed light on the various ways that austerity politics matter for young adults’ everyday lives in different places. This approach enables him to reveal that the ways in which young adults living in Knocknaheeny, Cork and Ballymun, Dublin experience different spheres—work and income, housing, and community and voluntary engagement—are affected by national austerity and the global financial crisis and at the same time by local circumstances, namely the organization of neighborhood regeneration and the presence or absence of community services.

In their contribution to *suburban struggles of everyday life*, Marius Mlejnek and Petra Lütke mobilise the concept of everyday struggle to bring to the fore the multiscalarity of suburbanization dynamics and socio-spatial change more broadly. Referring to the debate on planetary urbanisation, they call for a deeper engagement with everyday experiences and local peculiarities in order to gain a more differentiated understanding of sub/urbanization dynamics. Thus, their in-depth study of residents’ struggles in the area Widdersdorf-Süd at the edge of Cologne, mainly in terms of restricted mobilities, serves to add nuance to the broader concept of suburbanization in its multiple iterations across the globe.

Through the common entering point to the study sites through international university teaching programmes, Juliana Canedo and Hassan Elmouelhi explore the concept of *spatial integration of refugees* in Berlin, Germany and Irbid, Jordan. While working under significantly different administrative structures in their comparison sites and encountering different policies and accommodation structures for migrants in the two cities, the approach of entering the spaces through the teaching programmes equips them with a common lens. Using the migrant perspective and the results from the micro-level teaching engagement inductively, the framework allows them to come up with a general agenda and policy recommendations towards a post-migrant approach.

Grischa Frederik Bertram and Gerhard Kienast study *planning-related protest as a key to understanding urban particularities*. To arrive at this variation finding between German urban municipalities, they set up a quantitative repository of cause related conflict, feeding into the analysis of the history and nature of planning related protests in the different sites. Working under the common institutional framework of German planning legislation, the comparison aims for a systematic approach and comprehensive understanding of the situated protests by developing a protest data mining method. The method developed can thereby not only deliver insights on the relation of planning and protest, but also serve as a template to adapt for research on public planning discourse and other social

movements in cities working under a common governance framework.

Using the concept of *water delivery configurations*, Christian Rosen and Nina Gribat build a reference framework which allows them to compare *hybrid urbanisms* under specific governance systems in Sunyani, Ghana and Arequipa, Peru. In their article, they discuss how unpacking their findings through the concepts of “structural” governance and “everyday” practice allows them to shed new light onto the nature of the governance, infrastructure, and practices around water. This is a departure from their previous conceptualisation of discussing the data along “formal and informal” framings. Consequently, they gain new perspectives on the interrelation of different scales of water delivery and the decision-making behind it that go beyond mono-scale framings and entanglements of local governance.

Margot Rubin, Lindsay Blair Howe, Sarah Charlton, Muhammed Suleman, Anselmo Cani, Lesego Tshuwa, and Alexandra Parker (2023, p. 362) come up with a unifying concept of “indifferent ruins” to discuss governance responses to mobility infrastructure requirements in Gauteng City Region and Greater Maputo. They focus on macro-processes within the regions, such as the influence of modernist planning ideals and positivist thinking towards infrastructure, while simultaneously engaging in granular studies. Their approach is “radically inductive” (Söderström in Rubin et al., 2023) in order to take the “everyday” experience as a starting point to question the “structural” governance decisions based on empirical findings and comparative analysis. For them, the comparative and trans scalar method provides an opportunity to gain a refined understanding of transport infrastructure in general.

Koen Faber, Simon Kingham, Lindsey Conrow, and Dea van Lierop present a quantitative study of active travel—walking or cycling—of immigrants in two different countries in order to understand how far individual travel behaviour and preferences are influenced by the specific context immigrants experience: the availability of transport modes, travel cultures, and other factors. By comparing a country with an active travel culture, the Netherlands, and a country with a less active travel culture, New Zealand, they show how immigrants—in the case of New Zealand from the Netherlands—either adapt to the new context with its infrastructures and norms, or rather maintain their customary travel behaviour. Their contribution shows the complications of comparing across different institutional governance settings and offers explanations for the ways in which individual behaviour may be changed by a broader national context, in this case in terms of infrastructure and cultural norms.

While all contributions reflect a conceptualization of the structural and the everyday as co-constitutive, they feature different foci in terms of the comparative angle. Some contributions’ comparison serves to understand individual agency and behaviour and the ways they are influenced by broader social structures and norms, thus

furthering our understanding of the ways in which structural aspects matter beyond specific contexts (Beier; Bertram & Kienast; Faber et al.; Rosen & Gribat). Others employ a more encompassing perspective, emphasizing how individual experiences, struggles, and local situations may help to add nuance to broader phenomena, such as suburbanization or austerity (Mlejnek & Lütke; van Lanen). Meanwhile, a third group uses inductive approaches gathering data from the everyday to interrogate institutions and governance structures, thus arriving at normative assessments (Canedo & Elmouelhi; Rubin et al.). All contributions thus elaborate on the knowledge gained through comparison in terms of the interrelations of the everyday and the structural. We, therefore, argue that approaches with a focus on structural dynamics and everyday practices can not only be merged but they should also be combined for a better understanding of cities.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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